

The Jewish Component in Jewish Family and Children's Service*

Martin Greenberg, D.S.W.

Executive Director, Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, New York

We tend to doubt that the Jewish component will be identified as a single global entity, expressible with the fundamental simplicity of an equation like Einstein's $E = MC^2$.

When a Jewish family and children's service is invited to discuss its Jewish component, the real agenda often turns out to be "Why can't you be more Jewish?" or "Why can't you express your Jewishness in our way?"

I quickly add, however, that agency lay and professional leaders have been giving a great deal of thought to the Jewish issue and they really like to discuss it, especially with those who share their concern for enhancing the quality of Jewish communal life.

I can sum up in three points: (1) these agencies are much more Jewish than we think; (2) but they are not as Jewish as we would like them to be; and (3) we are trying to develop ways of making them more Jewish.

Multiple Dimensions

We tend to doubt that the Jewish component will be identified as a single global entity, expressible with the fundamental simplicity of an equation like Einstein's: $E = MC^2$. Instead, the Jewish component is likely to have many different but interrelated dimensions. The more an agency "delivers" in each of these dimensions, the higher will be its Jewish component.

It is not likely that anyone can give a lasting statement on the substantive elements of Jewish dimensions. Periodically, the definition has to be up-dated in recognition of:

Changing priorities within the Jewish community — During the past ten years, for

* This article is substantially the presentation at a Symposium on the Jewish Component in Communal Service, Baltimore Hebrew College, February 19, 1978. Charles Zibbell's opening address at this Conference was published in the December, 1978 issue of this journal. Fred Berl's address is contained on p. 366, this issue.

example, there has been great concern over alienated youth, intermarriage, Jewish illiteracy, divorce and separations—and other problems associated with dysfunctions of the Jewish family.

Changing priorities within the agencies — the agencies have their own set of priorities which reflect both the total community concerns and the particular concerns arising from their day-to-day service to people in need.

Changing technology — Innovations in the delivery of service and improvements in practice skills often made it feasible to accept new goals. Recent developments in techniques for teaching moral values, for example, have opened new vistas in family life education.

Personnel changes — In some communities the appearance of newer, more Jewishly committed staff members has resulted in more attention to Jewish purpose.

Similarities Between Jewish and Non-Sectarian Agencies

It is useful, in identifying Jewish dimensions of service, to compare Jewish family and children's agencies with non-sectarian ones. They are, of course, similar in many ways. But it is their differences which will silhouette the Jewish component.

To start with the similarities, the Jewish and non-sectarian agencies share the basic goal of protecting and enhancing the family and safeguarding the special contribution it makes to its members.

They both offer essentially the same basic set of services:

Counseling for individuals and families: problem solving or therapeutic processes

aimed at ameliorating social dysfunction; problems in relationship, especially within the family; etc.

Concrete services, as, for example, home-maker, housekeeper, financial assistance, legal assistance, refugee settlement services, foster care, adoption, protective services.

Family life education, essentially an educational service, given in a group setting, with a focus on preparing people to cope with predictable "normal" problems, with emphasis on prevention.

Advocacy, speaking up on behalf of people in need and mobilizing community resources to provide appropriate services.

They both use essentially the same social work technology and call on other disciplines for consultation or special services. These specialists include the home economist, lawyer, physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, vocational counselor.

They both affirm the importance of understanding a client's cultural orientation (as well as the client's particular personality and situation).

They both subscribe to the doctrine of self-determination for the client. This gives the client a large share of control over goals and process, and it recognizes that engaging with the agency is a voluntary act by the client who can terminate at any point.

They both are in pursuit of excellence and are accountable to a community. (Since the Jewish agency's community tends to be smaller, it may be more visible and, thus, have to work harder to sustain a reputation for excellence.)

The Critical Differences Between Jewish and Non-Sectarian Agencies

Let us turn now to the differences which define the Jewish dimensions of the Jewish agency:

1. The agency identifies itself as Jewish in its symbols, ambience, observance of traditions, membership, etc. (While this is a clear difference, it is not likely that separate Jewish

agencies would be maintained if this were the only way they differed from the non-sectarian agency.)

2. More than any non-sectarian agency, the Jewish agency keeps track of the needs of Jewish families in the community. In effect, it maintains a "radar" and searches out the highly vulnerable sub-groups, as for example, the poor, children and elderly who need protective services, one-parent families, alienated youth or youth in cult groups, refugees, etc. It uses this knowledge in conducting all four of its basic services: counseling, concrete services, family life education and advocacy.

3. More than any non-sectarian agency, the Jewish agency works closely with Jewish communal institutions, including the Federation and its network of agencies, synagogues, schools, membership organizations, activist groups, etc. This close working relationship serves many purposes: it increases the agency's knowledge of community needs; it increases community understanding of agency services and develops sources of referrals; it leads to joint sponsorship of services (or a consortium approach in giving service); it produces "coalitions" which can be more effective in advocacy activities; it contributes toward fulfillment of accountability requirements. Here too, the close working relationship is used in conducting all four basic services: counseling, concrete services, family life education advocacy . . . (The agency, of course, also maintains close working relationships with all the other voluntary and government agencies which provide services to the Jewish community and this too cuts across all basic agency services.)

4. More than any non-sectarian agency, in the interaction between client and agency, the Jewish agency reflects the cultural-ethnic-ideological-religious values of the Jewish community. During interviews and at group sessions, Jewish values and Jewish ways of doing things thus become reference points in exploring goals, options, behavior patterns, conflicts, etc.

The Controversial Issues

There is practically universal acceptance, in principle, of the first three dimensions of a JF&CS. There may be considerable variation among agencies in how they implement the concepts. Some, for example, do not really keep themselves fully posted on the significant changes occurring among people with problems or they are too ready to accept the status quo in unmet needs and fail to act as advocates.

However, there is controversy over reflecting Jewish values in the interview and group meetings. Here are three aspects of the controversy:

We are a "pluralistic" Jewish community with a range of ideologies that encompasses the highly orthodox and the agnostic. How does an agency identify which set of Jewish values it should reflect? We also have the Jewishly committed, knowledgeable, religiously observant professional who feels his/her agency is dragging, and that there are too few opportunities to use Jewishness as a "dynamic" in giving service.

There is also the criticism that the agencies are not doing all they can, or enough, to reverse the trends toward increasing intermarriage and divorce and decreasing synagogue membership and religious observance and other problems to the extent they stem from dysfunctions in the Jewish family.

Defining Jewish Values in a Pluralistic Jewish Community

The Jewish family and children's agency operates in a community context consisting of several clusters of organizations which send "messages" on values which are to be reflected by the agency. There are the familiar "pluralistic" congregational groups: highly orthodox, orthodox, conservative and reform, and then the unaffiliated, who, in some communities, constitute more than 40 percent of the Jewish population. In specific substantive areas, each may have a special slant on how the salient Jewish values should be reflected.

Each group believes its view is better than the others (at least, for its own adherents) and should, therefore, get special consideration. But as a representative of the total community the agency is expected to consider all views as being valid.

Those who fund services invariably influence an agency's value system. An agency may receive funds from all of the following sources: *government* and the *United Way* (which tend to expect agencies to comply with current interpretations of "affirmative action"); the *Jewish Welfare Federation* (which expects the agency to "maximize" Jewish values without stirring up opposition); and *clients* who pay fees for service. The funding "mix" varies from one community to another, and one would expect some correlation of this with an agency's expression of Jewish values.

It should be easy for an agency to identify the salient Jewish values. But even on simple questions, such as whether to keep the agency closed on the second days of Passover and Succoth, an agency may have divergent views to consider. The funding sources want low unit costs of service; maximum holiday observance obviously raises costs. Moreover, the majority of families may not observe the second day of the holiday at home or in their work, and they may not understand or accept why services are withheld on these days.

Ultimately, an agency takes periodic readings on what it believes is its community consensus on the issue. (A January 1978 survey, for example, showed the member agencies of the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies are now split about 3 to 1 in their practice on closings for the second day of these holidays. Ten years ago only a handful were closed).

Defining Jewish Values in Counseling Situation

It is one thing to reach decisions on holiday observance, Jewish ambience in the agency's office, serving of kosher food at agency

functions and other issues which define the composite "Jewish image" of the agency. But how does an agency define the Jewish values which workers should reflect in counseling service with individual clients? Here is a simple illustration:

A family asks for help in getting a divorce. There is little likelihood that the marriage can be preserved. It is also clear that the family is only planning to get a civil divorce and is not also considering a Jewish divorce (*get*).

As some have suggested, should the agency strongly urge such families to get a Jewish divorce? Or should the agency concentrate on the interpersonal relationships and social problems and leave the "secular Jew" to his own devices and the religious issues to the rabbi and synagogue?

Should the agency give each worker a certain amount of latitude on this issue: the Jewishly committed orthodox worker could pick up on the issue of Jewish divorce if he/she believes it would be useful—and the secular worker could leave it alone.

My reading is that the agencies are evolving a consensus along these lines:

Jewish issues are important and their implications for family functioning should be included in the discussions with the client whenever they are relevant.

In a pluralistic Jewish community, the agency has to be guided by the client's own ideological orientation, not by the worker's and not by a composite of all the ideologies.

In dealing with Jewish issues, the staff member works cooperatively with the rabbi and synagogue, just as he/she would do for any other area covered by a specialized institution.

Engaging the Client in Considering Jewish Values

There are, of course, different ways in which Jewish issues can be discussed with a family. Again, here is a simple illustration:

Two young adults ask for pre-marital counseling. One is Jewish; the other is not. But they do not see intermarriage as an issue. Their primary concern is how well they get

along together, and their respective long-range goals. They came to the Jewish agency because friends told them it offers a high quality service, and the fees are manageable.

If the couple came to a rabbi, he would probably affirm (in his role as preacher) that a good Jew is expected to marry within the faith. Failing that, he would affirm that the non-Jewish partner should be prepared to convert to Judaism.

If this couple had come to a Jewish agency ten years ago, the chances are that the worker would have focused exclusively on the interpersonal issues and not raised any question about intermarriage unless the couple brought it up.

Currently, agencies expect the worker to take the initiative in introducing the issue of intermarriage. Not in a role of preacher, affirming an expected pattern of behavior, but as a counselor, inviting the couple to consider some of the situations they are likely to encounter, and how these would fit in with their goals as individuals, and as members of families and community groups. This would all be done, of course, within the context of the client's own ideological orientation; it would thus have a different content for Jewish partners who are orthodox, liberal or secular and it would take into full account the ideological orientation of the non-Jewish partner.

Jewish Dimension in Family Life Education

Family life education programs are designed to help people cope with the "predictable" crises in their life cycle. There was a time when we believed that there were just two turbulent phases in a person's life: adolescence and the onset of old age and that everything in between was serenity. Now there is a clearer recognition of the many phases, stages, "passages," etc. that one goes through as part of the normal process of getting older.

The family life education groups conducted by family service agencies generally meet for from four to six sessions. The emphasis is on education and support (in contrast to therapy and inter-personal relationships within the

group which generally is the emphasis in their therapy groups).

Illustrative problem areas considered by FLE groups include: adolescence, one-parent families, filling the void when adult children leave home, choosing a second career, preparing for retirement, caring for an aged parent, communicating within the family, widowhood.

The Jewish agencies integrate Jewish dimensions into their family life education programs in two ways: (1) wherever relevant, they introduce Jewish values and traditions as guidelines to consider in problem-solving and (2) they conduct groups which are organized around specific Jewish concerns; as for example, reintroducing Sabbath in the home, interdating and intermarriage, Jewish views on sex and marriage, the family's role in transmitting Jewish values.

The agencies conduct many of their Jewish family life programs cooperatively with other Jewish institutions, including synagogues, schools, community centers and membership organizations. Occasionally there is team leadership with the agency worker and a rabbi or Jewish educator sharing responsibility for leading a group. Some agencies look to a rabbi or Jewish educator for consultation on Jewish themes. This may include having the consultant conduct staff seminars on Jewish issues and sensitizing staff to the different Jewish ideological views that are likely to be reflected in family life groups.

Jewish Dimension in Settlement Services for Refugees from USSR

Unlike immigrants to the U.S. in earlier "waves," many of the emigrants from the USSR had been cut off from Jewish institutions and were severely restricted in their opportunities for positive identification and participation as Jews. The Jewish family and children's agencies are charged in most communities with the primary responsibility for the support and social communal integration of the new arrivals.

Recognizing the special needs, the Jewish

family and children's agencies are making a special effort to introduce immigrant families to the full spectrum of Jewish communal organizations, religious and secular, including synagogues, Jewish schools, community centers, membership organizations and self-help organizations. In most, if not all, communities, the Jewish institutions extend a warm welcome and waive membership fees or offer special scholarships as a way of encouraging full participation.

Family agencies also help some of the immigrants explore their feelings about their Jewish identification—and find an appropriate way of expressing their Jewishness in the new land.

Implications for Staff Recruitment and Development

This approach has several implications for staff recruitment and development. First, an agency would like to be sure that the staff member feels comfortable about his/her own ethnic/religious identification, and that a worker's identification problems are not likely to interfere with service to the client.

Secondly, a worker should be empathetic and accepting of the full spectrum of ideologies within the pluralistic Jewish community.

Third, the worker should be knowledgeable about each ideological system. As a minimum he/she should know the basic beliefs and practices which influence (1) family functioning, (2) the problems the clients bring to the agency and (3) client-agency relationship patterns.

Fourth, the worker should know when to seek information and/or consultation on "Jewish issues" which are implicated in the service to clients. Conversely, the agency should provide for consultation on "Jewish issues" on the same basis that it provides consultation in other areas (health care, legal, psychiatric, psychological).

Summing Up

We return to the initial statement. Our family and children's agencies are more Jewish

than we think. But they are not as Jewish as we would like them to be, and we are hard at work exploring ways of enhancing their Jewish dimensions. Most important, we place high

value on working cooperatively with all the other Jewish institutions which share our concern for the quality of Jewish communal life.